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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a brief overview of a research project carried out by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning on integrating language and culture in the social studies. It is suggested that there is a need to understand the academic language competencies necessary for students to function successfully in the social studies classroom before integrated language and content lessons are developed. The development of an instructional unit by middle school teachers and project researchers around the theme of protest and the American Revolution is described, and one lesson is provided for illustration. A discussion on teacher strategies for implementing the unit is included. Information on where to obtain the unit and the full research report is also provided. (VWL)

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Integrating Language and Culture in Middle School American History Classes

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Digest

February 1994

Integrating Language and Culture in Middle School American History Classes (EDO-FL-94-07)

National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning

This Digest is based on a report published by the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning, University of California, Santa Cruz, *Integrating Language and Culture in Middle School American History Classes*, by Deborah J. Short. Copies of the report are available for $4.00 from Center for Applied Linguistics, NCRCDSLL, 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037.

The participation of linguistically and culturally diverse students in U.S. schools has increased dramatically during the last decade. Tucker (1990) projects that, by the year 2000, the majority of the school-aged population in 50 or more major U.S. cities will be from language minority backgrounds. These English language learners (ELLs) are faced with the burden of mastering the academic content of their classes at the same time they are developing language skills.

Many educators contend that delaying academic instruction until English is fully mastered is detrimental to the academic success of these students (Cummins, 1981; Collier, 1989). To minimize the time gap between students acquiring proficiency in English and beginning instruction in content areas, many educators, both English as a second language (ESL) and content teachers, have started integrating language and content objectives in their lessons. A key feature of this approach is emphasis on active student communication on content topics. Successful techniques include increased use of visuals and demonstrations, graphic organizers, thinking and study skill development, and pre-reading and pre-writing activities (see, among others, Crandall, 1993; Short, 1991). By providing opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts, teachers facilitate the transition of their students into mainstream courses.

Integrating Language and Culture in Social Studies

In 1991, the National Center for Research on Cultural Diversity and Second Language Learning began a study, *Integrating Language and Culture in the Social Studies*, that has focused on two issues: (1) how social studies knowledge is constructed in middle school classrooms with students who are learning English as a second language, and (2) the linguistic and cultural competencies needed by these students to engage effectively in this domain of discourse and learning. Project components include a literature review on teaching social studies and integrating language and content; development and field-testing of instructional materials; observation of effective teachers; analysis of the language required in social studies from commercial textbooks; analysis of discourse from transcripts of classroom interaction and student work; and training social studies and ESL teachers in teaching content to ELLs.

The Academic Language of American History

A prerequisite to developing integrated language and content lessons in social studies is an understanding of the academic language competencies needed to function successfully in the social studies classroom. In this project, academic language was defined broadly to include semantic and syntactic features (e.g., vocabulary items, sentence structure, transition markers, cohesive ties) and language functions and tasks that are part of social studies classroom routines (e.g., defining terms, explaining historical significance, reading expository text, preparing research reports). The project has identified key social studies terms and tasks that need to be mastered by students as part of an American history course.

Instructional tools. Students need to use tools that correspond closely to social studies, such as globes and maps. Such tools generate language that varies from key vocabulary words like *north* and *south* to general instructions like "look at the bottom of page 25."

Concrete vocabulary. For example, names of famous people and events (e.g., Paul Revere, Stamp Act) can be taught directly, through visual aids, demonstrations, and physical movement.

Conceptual vocabulary. This type of vocabulary is more abstract and is more difficult for students to comprehend. Some concepts have a social studies thrust (e.g., democracy, patriotism), but others are not limited to a social studies context (e.g., taxation). Nonetheless, these concepts are of particular importance to understanding history, and teachers of ELLs should take care to instruct students in the meanings and use of these words. Teachers can make connections with students' personal experiences and with current events to do this.

Language functions. Some functions occur regularly in both student and teacher discourse; others are in the domain of the teacher. For instance, both teachers and students are expected to define terms and sequence events. Teachers, however, are more apt to rephrase student responses, conduct reviews of information, and give directions than are students. Teachers of ELLs may need to provide practice opportunities to enable students to use appropriate functional language.

Examination of textbooks used in middle school American history courses further revealed common text structures. Most texts are written along a chronological pattern, while others use a cause and effect framework. Analyses of these texts, along with lesson presentations and assignments, showed that certain linguistic signals cue students to time references, cause and effect, and comparison and contrast in text structures and assignments. Such signals included verb tenses and conditions, expressions of time, rhetorical markers (e.g., temporal phrases, conjunctions), and causative words (e.g., *as a result, so*). Classroom observations showed that students who were taught to recognize these cues improved their reading and writing skills.

Protest and the American Revolution: An Instructional Model

Drawing on this research, middle school teachers and project researchers developed an instructional unit (see Short, et. al, 1994) around the theme of protest in the American Revolution. The unit was designed to be multiculturally inclusive with activities that built

upon the students' varied backgrounds and reflected the diversity prevalent in the population of the late 1700s. Individual lessons focused on events and issues that led to the American Revolution, types and symbols of protest, and the roles that several ethnic, racial, and gender groups played during the 1760s and 1770s. This theme suited ELLs as many have some background knowledge and experience related to protest and revolution from their own countries. They may not have, however, recognized the important role that protest maintains in American democratic tradition. Because the theme was also topical, it allowed teachers to make connections with current events.

Two subthemes were also chosen for the unit: *symbolism*, which students examined through lessons on protest flags and songs, political cartoons, and poetry, and *point of view*, which students investigated while studying different groups in pre-revolutionary America, such as Native Americans, African Americans (slaves and free), Daughters of Liberty, Loyalists, and Patriots.

Content objectives were drawn from commercial textbooks and social studies curricula. Language objectives promoted development in listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, with specific attention to verbal interaction among students and to academic tasks, such as reading for specific information, taking notes, listening for details, presenting an oral report, and writing a comparison essay. Activities reflected academic functions and tasks found to be important for success in mainstream social studies classes and included thinking and study skill activities.

Each unit lesson was composed of five phases: 1) **motivation**, which sought to activate student background knowledge and connect to past experiences; 2) **presentation** of new material, in whole group or small group work, where the teacher took the lead in sharing information or eliciting discoveries from the students; 3) **practice**, where students were guided in processing new information, often through teacher modeling; 4) **application**, where small groups applied new ideas to old; and 5) **review**, informal assessment where student understanding of the lesson objectives was checked. Lessons contained extension and project activities to reinforce or extend the concepts covered and provide alternative activities, especially for multilevel classes.

One example will illustrate the process. In this lesson, students explored the points of view of different political, ethnic, and gender groups and the reasons they sided with either the colonists or the British during the Revolutionary War, in the following manner:

- **Motivation:** Students looked at optical illusions, which served as concrete visual manifestations of differing viewpoints.
- **Presentation:** The class discussed the Rodney King beating trial as an example of a recent incident that triggered a variety of points of view.
- **Practice:** Students used prior knowledge to decide on which side of the Revolutionary War certain groups, such as African-American slaves and Native Americans, would have fought.
- **Application:** Cooperative groups reflected on different revolutionary groups, developed a list of reasons for fighting on one side in the war, and presented it to the class.
- **Review/evaluation:** Students completed a chart of revolutionary groups using information provided by the cooperative groups.
- **Extension:** Students could stage a debate about two events leading up to the Revolution.
- **Project activity:** Students could write a letter to the editor based on their revolutionary group's reasons for fighting for the colonists or for the British.

Teacher Strategies

The teachers who have participated in this project have facilitated students' success in such ways as modifying lessons when necessary, providing more explicit vocabulary instruction, or modeling activities with the class as a whole before breaking students into small groups. Teachers supplemented the textbooks in order to help students interpret history through different lenses, examining the perspectives of people living in that time. They incorporated pre-reading and pre-writing strategies so the ELLs would have some schema upon which to draw before completing an assignment. They encouraged students to conduct research on their own, but provided support and assistance or helped students solicit assistance from a classmate. All of these accommodations aided students in comprehending and using the academic language of social studies and in strengthening their knowledge of American history.

Conclusion

This model for integrating language, content, and culture into curricula is promising. Lessons designed along these lines offer students a multicultural perspective on the content and also relate to students' knowledge of their native cultural and historic heritages. The lessons, in general, provide opportunities for hands-on interaction with historical concepts and events, opportunities that are often lacking in middle school social studies curricula. As a result, the ELLs that have participated in these lessons have been enthusiastic participants in class, practicing their language skills and demonstrating their critical thinking abilities. Further, the lesson activities that promote discussion, reading comprehension, and writing processes not only serve to develop the students' language skills but also prepare them for requirements of mainstream classrooms.

Project observations and analyses have revealed that the academic language used in social studies is commensurate with much of the academic language in other humanities courses and is similar to the non-technical language used in the math and science classroom. Because the language skills required for participation in social studies courses mirrors that of other academic courses, placement in integrated language and social studies classes is recommended for developing the academic skills needed by ELLs before they are placed in mainstream classes.

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